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# The Corpse of Accelerationism

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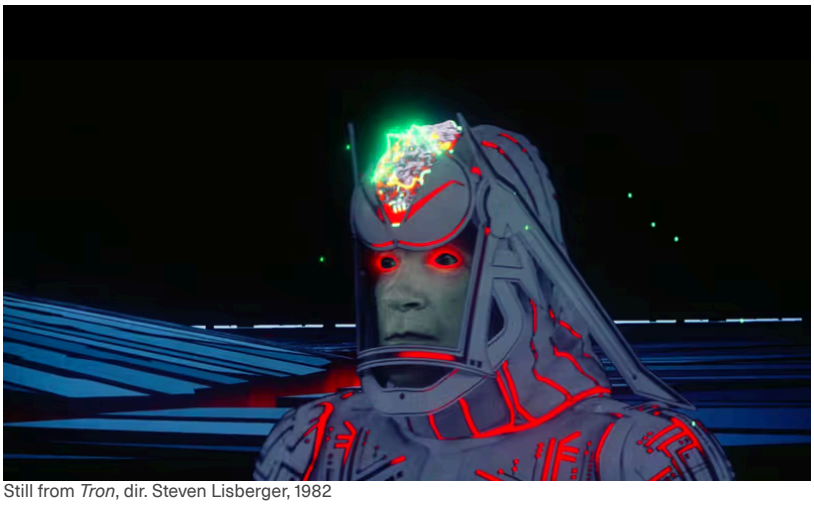

Still from *Tron*, dir. Steven Lisberger, 1982

Why kick the corpse of accelerationism? Over ten years since I first coined the term, it now seems to have disappeared or been eclipsed by more urgent debates. If accelerationism can be defined as the cultural movement which argues for the embrace of technology and abstract thinking to punch through to a postcapitalist future, we might seem to be left with very few accelerationists standing. Isn't there a risk, especially for a critic of accelerationism like me, of keeping alive something that should rightly by now be a dead dog? It is true that the passions aroused by the accelerationist moment have faded, and what movement there was, especially on the left, now takes more sober and restrained forms. If accelerationism is an avant-garde movement, in the same vein as Futurism, then, like so many of those movements, it seems to have exhausted itself. This is not necessarily something to be regretted, even by those who embraced it. The Italian Futurists saw their movement of speed as one that should be made obsolescent by the forces they had unleashed. From a very different cultural and political viewpoint, Guy Debord, leader of the Situationists in the 1960s and '70s, thought that the role of avant-gardes was to disappear once their work was done. The pro-accelerationist might even argue that accelerationism has achieved its goals, placing debates about technology and change as central, and can now quit the field with honor.

Rumors of the demise of accelerationism have been exaggerated. In an age much given to the gothic metaphor, we could also add that accelerationism, if dead, remains a haunting specter presiding over the cultural landscape. Issues concerning the role of technology in our culture and in relation to political change have not gone away. The recent debates on large language models (LLMs) and artificial intelligence (AI) suggest how pressing the issues of the replacement of humans by machines and the control of technology remain and how they will continue. If accelerationism was the first movement of thought in the age of social media, then that age has not ended. Accelerationism initially thrived in the space of blog debates, allowing longer-form discussions, and on Twitter (now X), giving those debates an abbreviated and pungent form. Today, social media is dominated increasingly by bots, memes, AI, and monetization. The decay of various online platforms has taken away some of the utopian charge of these virtual spaces, leaving behind a sparser and more vitriolic scene.

This still raises the question of how we should engage with technology, its potentials and its dangers (even if those dangers don't seem to offer much chance of reversing into saving). While accelerationism might have faded as a movement, along with the platforms it depended on, that fading itself poses questions. We can, of course, note the corporate domination of online spaces, with a series of familiar names (Google, Amazon, Netflix, etc.). The Zaibatsus of William Gibson's cyberpunk Sprawl fictions—vast, possibly even intelligent, megacorporations—are certainly with us. At the same time, state agents remain at work, and alongside that, an increasingly automated space of bots and emergent AI, in the form of LLMs. Of course, even back in the early 2010s, 90 percent of all daily email traffic, it was estimated, was spam, the precursor to some forms of contemporary AI. The space of the internet has been one of ongoing warfare and crisis, in its own ways, and reflecting on that is a vital task.

I would suggest that the failure of accelerationism to persist into our current moment speaks to something of its lack of critical engagement with technology. While it was right to raise questions about the technophobia of some elements of the left and of society in general, the replacement technophilia was largely just an inversion. This point would be made with devastating force by Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim in their *Prometheus and Gaia* (2022). That book noted the coincidence of opposites between accelerationism and its critics, like Bruno Latour, who embraced an apparently alternative thinking of Gaia and the earth. Fluss and Frim argued that what was shared between these worldviews were irrationalist commitments, including the embrace of myth as a mode constituting our thinking. The thinking of technology remained obscured by this mythic mode. It may be that the kind of questioning accelerationism at least started needed to be made and remains relevant, even if the ways in which those criticisms were made has not proved durable.

What did happen to accelerationism between then and now? If accelerationism has disappeared or mutated, then can a brief reconstruction of the last ten or so years help guide us? Between the first accelerationist manifesto (2013), the first edition of my book *Malign Velocities* (2014), and now, there was a spate of manifestos, often inspired by accelerationism. The original inspiration, and with a case to be the first accelerationist manifesto, was Alain Badiou's *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1999 in English translation). Badiou had already insisted on the necessity of philosophy, the need for an abstract mathematical form for thought, and taken amusing pot shots at Heidegger's hokey invocations of peasants and the Black Forest. It would turn out that, despite Badiou's embrace of high technology, his way of thinking remained heavily indebted to Heidegger. It was, however, Badiou's polemical verve, his embrace of philosophy, and this pro-technology edge which was to prove influential. There was a brief age of manifestos and, of course, anti-manifestos, as the battle over accelerationism spread and intensified.

This is not just to mock. The manifesto wasn't only a form conducive to shortened attention spans, but also reflected a desire to break out of the hieratic, dilatory, and often mystificatory language of previous theory (especially that known as post-structuralism). Badiou's own turn against language and the insistence on mathematics was also influential on this desire to actually say and do things, rather than to talk about saying and doing things. The Derridean tendency to begin every discussion with a meditation on beginnings and titles began to feel like the archest of delaying tactics. That said, the brief and aggressive form of the manifesto could leave a lot to the reader. Part of the original purpose of *Malign Velocities* was to search for the history and context for various forms of the accelerationist gesture. Ideas, as Mao said, do not fall from the sky, but emerge out of social practice. The thunderbolts of manifestos launched from the Mount Olympus of social media could be energizing, but also enervating. The shifting ground, the guesses about authorship, the various collectives that might or might not be collectives, and anathemas and denunciations led to a hectic and often confusing landscape.

One characteristic of this period was impatience with previous and existing modes of thought, with some exceptions (like Badiou). This was not only true of the accelerationist denunciation of folk politics, which claimed that existing left politics was attached to the human, community, nature, and limits. We also had the speculative-realist dismissal of correlationism, in which all previous thought was fixated on the relation of the human to the nonhuman and so could not access the great outdoors of reality. The communizers argued that left politics was dominated by programmatism, in which the left tried to develop programs to lead the workers rather than following the dissolution of the identity of the worker. Another more recent example is the Afro-pessimist attack on previous radicalisms for anti-Blackness, for ignoring the structuring role of chattel slavery for society and thinking.

The irony was that this thinking resembled nothing so much as the Heideggerian (and Derridean) attempt to think beyond the closure of metaphysics. While Heidegger might have been wrong on technology, which he claimed was the last form of metaphysics, he was apparently right in dismissing vast swathes of thought as metaphysical. The game could be played: Who was the last metaphysician? Was it Nietzsche, with his will-to-power, as Heidegger said? How about Antonin Artaud and his exhaustion of presence in his own madness, as Derrida would suggest? Derrida could also imply Heidegger himself had fallen prey to this mode of thinking. While the movements of the 2010s aimed to extract themselves from what they thought were these sterile debates, the irony is they repeated them in new forms.

In this bonfire of the past, there were a couple of major survivors, notably Nietzsche and Deleuze. While I noted the influence of both in *Malign Velocities*, I did underestimate the influence of Nietzsche especially. Nietzsche not only provided the accelerationists with an aggressive tone but also an anti-bourgeois cultural politics, an antagonism to metaphysics, and an embrace of myth and the aesthetic. Since the publication in English of Domenico Losurdo's *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel* (2020) and the reissue of Georg Lukács's *The Destruction of Reason* (2021), we have gained valuable resources for a critique of Nietzsche. The problem is not simply Nietzsche's overt politics, which are that of an aristocratic rebel, but also how his thinking is dominated by the political and by a fragmentation of reason in the name of contingency. It is this metaphysical assault on reason which needs to be considered and answered.

In terms of accelerationism, this is not only the problem of right and reactionary accelerationism, embodied in the figure of Nick Land—"our Nietzsche," according to Mark Fisher. Right and reactionary accelerationism is happy to adopt a Nietzschean aristocratic radicalism and its politics of caste, selection, and annihilation. The problem is that left accelerationist positions are also compromised by Nietzschean irrationalist commitments. This is the undesirable combination, as Lukács said, of left ethics with right-wing epistemology. I should also add that this critique of Nietzsche also impacted my own work, which was

vulnerable in its adoption of Nietzschean politicization that depended on will and choice. Some figures associated with accelerationism, even in a fringe way, have gone in a different direction—towards reason and towards Hegel. That would seem to contradict my analysis. This tendency, however, is still existential, in emphasizing choice, and Nietzschean, in emphasizing will. Its favored reference is to a supposedly non-metaphysical Hegel, and one of its leading Hegelian references, Robert B. Pippin, has recently made a turn towards Heidegger.

Perhaps all this is to say the last ten years or so have not been as strange as they might initially appear. Beneath the appearance of radical change and the turnover in positions and ideas, there has been more continuity than we imagined. As I have suggested, Deleuze, one of the most influential formulators of accelerationism (with Guattari), remains highly influential, and Nietzsche also persists in influence. The emphasis of post-structuralist thinkers on language and mediation might have faded, but the commitment to a fragmented materiality of chaotic and unstable alterity remains. What we could say are the core philosophical or metaphysical commitments (even being cast as anti-metaphysics) have not significantly changed.

Appearances do, of course, count. Accelerationism is less and less claimed as a position in debates. Its rarer appearances now seem to arise among those on the very far right undertaking violent actions. They use accelerationism to refer to accelerating conflict by targeting spaces of hybridity and belief that run counter to racist desires for purification. In this case, accelerationism is more like the strategy of tension in 1970s Italy, in which far-right actors tried to undertake violent acts that would destabilize the existing order and encourage authoritarian solutions. These are also lone-wolf actions, in which ideology functions more like a label or even a meme which an individual identifies with. We can see the influence of social media again, with these far-right actors adopting the manifesto, livestreamed video, and the meme to justify and spread their ideology. The accelerationist, in this instance, is a malign influencer.

Accelerationism recently also reappeared in the upper levels of the corporate world, with effective accelerationism (e/acc). Now the aim is to use technology to sustain and spread human consciousness (or whatever replaces that consciousness) throughout the universe. Borrowing ideas from Nick Land and from science fiction, e/acc wants to create the deregulated development of technology, especially artificial intelligence, to allow us to transcend what William Gibson called “the meat.” Here we can see that accelerationism converges with the capitalist marketplace, and the dystopian notion of corporations as emergent sentient beings found in Gibson is reversed into the promise of a radical new future.

What we can see in both these instances is the strength and persistence of right accelerationism. While Italian Futurism was a heterogeneous movement, with its Nietzschean, anarchist, and proto-fascist tendencies, it might offer a salutary warning about the fate of the movement of accelerationism. We can point to the fact that Futurism was a cultural movement subject to different inflections, such as the more left-wing Russian Futurism. This diversity, however, obscures central commitments to an aesthetic politics of myth that turns technology from a social reality into a mythic force. The need to understand technology, and especially the control of technology (what used to be called the control of the means of production), threatens to disappear into a movement that only offers the pseudo-solution of merging with technology.

In many ways, accelerationism was a self-conscious attempt to reinvent an avant-garde movement at a time when such movements were supposed to be impossible. It also gave Nietzsche a central role, for his politics of will and myth, exactly as those earlier avant-gardes had. The take-up of accelerationism among artists, decried by many accelerationist thinkers, also supports this idea of accelerationism as a wider cultural movement. This is not to deny the role of ideas or to deny possibilities of misunderstanding, but rather to insist that these ideas and misunderstandings developed out of the ambiguities and tensions of accelerationism itself. *Malign Velocities* was and remains an attempt to grasp some of these ambiguities and tensions both historically and in their reemergence.

To analyze and understand accelerationism is to understand something of what has been happening over the last ten or so years. You could say this was a very restricted movement, unknown by much of humanity—barely a blip in regard to all the real issues and forces shaping these years. There would be truth to that, but the ways in which accelerationism reenacted past gestures as well as promising new utopian technological futures for the social media age still seems to me telling. It represented something of the real forces and work and their ideological expression in this period. If we need, as Hegel suggested, to grasp our own time in thought, that includes grasping where we might think it went astray. This is why I still think it is worth tracing the malign velocities of accelerationism and its mutations.

*This is the preface to the new edition of* Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism *by Benjamin Noys, out in December from Zer0 Books.*

**Category**
Technology, Avant-Garde

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